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“The Money...Was Far More of a Relapse for Me”: A Qualitative Study of Women’s Experiences Transitioning from the Sex Trade to Legal Employment

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate women’s experiences transitioning out of the sex trade, especially related to the types and contexts of learning they employed.

Keywords: social learning, transitional learning, sex trade

According to reported estimates, at least 12.3 million women and girls engage in the sex trade (Equity Now, n.d.) or “the lifestyle.” Women face multiple challenges transitioning out of the sex trade including finding legal work, overcoming a criminal record, learning to talk and dress appropriately, and learning basic life skills – like driving and managing a bank account. Little is known about women’s experiences transitioning from a stigmatized lifestyle in the sex trade to legal employment, what types of learning occur, nor how context affects this learning. The findings from this study add to the adult learning literature for stigmatized populations.

The purpose of this study was to investigate women’s experiences transitioning out of the sex trade, especially related to the types and contexts of learning they employed. Specifically, I explored three research questions to address the study’s purpose: what transition process(es) do women experience after exiting the sex trade; in which types of learning do women engage while transitioning out of the sex trade; and, in what context(s) do women primarily learn while transitioning out the sex trade? The conceptual framework, related literature, and methodology led to the findings and implications discussed in the following sections.

Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

I used three theories to comprise this study’s conceptual framework: Bridges’s (1991) transition model, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), and transitional learning theory (Stroobants, Jans, & Wildemeersch, 2010). Bridges’s transition model provided a framework for investigating women’s experiences transitioning out of the sex trade after exiting. Existing studies primarily investigated the initial exit out of the sex trade, not women’s transition experiences after exiting (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010; Sanders, 2007). Additionally, I applied social cognitive theory to evaluate how women used observation to learn (new ways of dressing, speaking, and acting after exiting (Bandura, 1986). I employed transitional learning theory (Stroobants et al., 2010), an underutilized adult learning theory, to investigate strategies women used to find work upon exiting and later transition to new work.

Research Design

I utilized a basic qualitative study research design to address the purpose and research questions. Consistent with an interpretivist epistemological framework, and a qualitative approach, I was “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). This epistemological framework also allows multiple socially constructed realities to be considered, which positions participants as experts in their own lives.

I identified participants using purposive sampling. Specifically, I found participating organizations through internet searches and through contacts I had in organizations helping women exit the sex trade. I recruited organizations to participate based on their engagement with potential participants who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) adult (age 18 years or over), (b) English speaking, (c) women, (d) who participated in the sex trade in Texas, (e) for at least 1 year, and (f) who exited the sex trade at least 3 months before being interviewed. I never directly contacted participants. They were given my contact information through the organization leaders, who acted as gatekeepers. The number of participating organizations grew through snowball sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants represented three organizations in Texas and one in California, where the individual was trafficked after engaging in the sex trade in Texas. Participants were 26 to 51 years old, exited the sex trade between 3 and 20 years ago, and were in the sex trade between 3 and 32 cumulative years before their most recent exit. Nine were recovering addicts and had been arrested, eight with convictions, and all participants were currently employed.

Data was collected through two interviews – one in-depth, semi-structured interview, and a second, brief interview allowing participants to amend the returned transcripts, if desired. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To analyze the data I used the constant comparative approach looking within and between interviews for themes using open coding and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I employed member checks, a research journal, and peer review to ensure trustworthiness and credibility.

Findings and Conclusions

Data analysis resulted in findings and discussion to follow, which support the following conclusions: Women leaving the sex trade (1) experienced a common transition process; (2) engaged in social learning (type), primarily by interacting with survivor leaders (context); and (3) utilized transitional learning (type), during work transitions (context).

Transition Process

Women's transition experience, as illustrated in Figure 1 by the grey circle encapsulating the transition process, are situated within sociocultural influences. Such influences include cultural norms around work appropriateness, societal perceptions of women in work and social roles, values about sex, attitudes toward criminality and sobriety, and norms around traditional middle class behavior. For example, Elizabeth said, "[My boss] was like... 'Do you really want everybody to hear all that?' I just didn't know that people shouldn't hear those kinds of things." These sociocultural factors influenced women's transition process, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

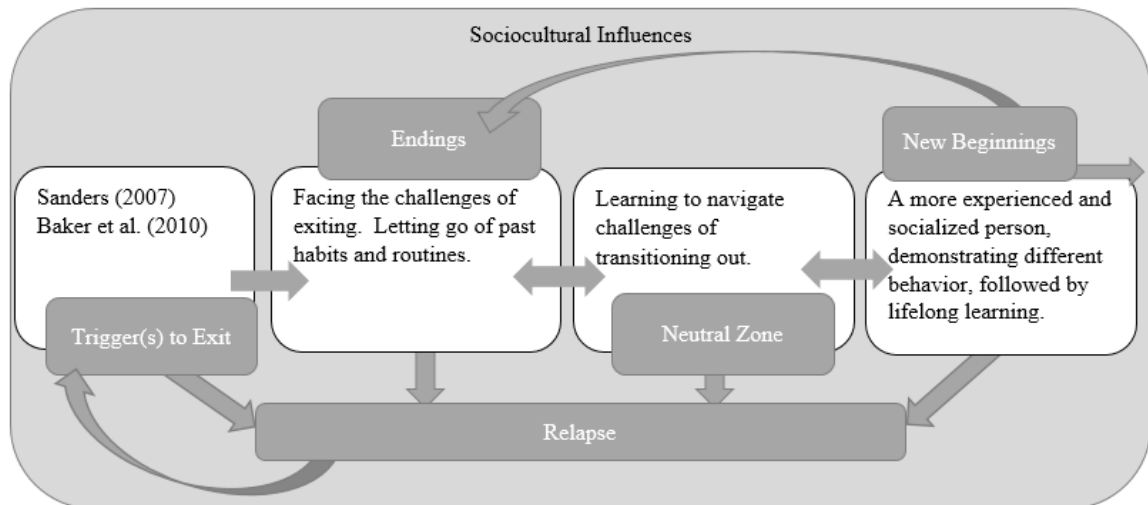


Figure 1. Women's transition process out of the sex trade.

The transition process starts with *triggers to exit* the sex trade. Women's triggers to exit included events such as having children, being arrested, and being "sick and tired," These findings confirmed those by Sanders (2007) and Baker (2010).

The transition process then follows Bridges's (1991) transition model moving from *endings*, to the *neutral zone*, and finally *new beginnings*. The *endings* phase, consistent with Bridges's (1991) model was characterized by "letting something go" (1991, p. 5), including a routine, relationship, or components of one's identity. As Billie said, the participants left behind "people, places, and things" when they transitioned out. During the endings phase, women's old behaviors, including talk, dress, and relationships created conflicts for them. For some, like Amelia, their inappropriate behavior at work, like using profanity on customers or missing work, resulted in losing their jobs.

Learning through additional experiences and social engagement helped women move from the endings phase, where they faced many challenges, to the *neutral zone*, where they started learning to manage these challenges. Similar to Baumgartner's (2007) model, related to HIV/AIDS patients, the women's previous identity from the sex trade started to recede in the neutral zone as the participants realized they were more than their past. The women learned to utilize the skills they developed in the sex trade as well as their natural attributes to earn "honest dollars," to be "on the right side," and to "integrate...into society."

Through experiential and social learning, as described in the next section, women started to learn what "normal" behavior was, which became more natural to them in the *new beginnings* phase. Baker et al.'s (2010) exit model signified a final exit from the sex trade (Baker et al., 2010). Previous exit and transition models specific to the sex trade signified a final exit (Baker et al., 2010) or reaching a goal as an *expert*, as in Oselin's (2009) final transition phase. Conversely, the transition process described here reveals a lifelong learning journey, as shown by the arrow moving from new beginnings into the future.

Further, the arrows used throughout the model signify the process's iterative nature, as women revisit phases. Additionally, arrows are used to show the women's susceptibility to relapse at any point in the transition process. In this paper, relapse specifically refers to returning to the sex trade after exiting, as opposed to drug addiction. Nine of the ten participants relapsed in both areas – drug addiction and returning to the sex trade. The participants most frequently identified three areas, in addition to drug use, representing the most powerful draws back into the sex trade - (a) the money earned in the sex trade, (b) undesirable jobs after exiting, and (c) the

lifestyle mindset. Related to the money and job desirability, Amelia said, “My first job was just awful. Rolling tamales, like two or three hundred a night...I was busting my ass all night for 50 bucks... I could make that in five minutes and I have numbers memorized.”

The lifestyle mindset refers to how women thought when in the sex trade, called “the lifestyle” by participants. Clara attributed having a pimp to the mindset. She said, “He got a lot of my money, but I still felt like I was in love with him...it was sick...I got that, because I am intelligent enough, but I was so irrational.” Similarly, Gloria described the addictive nature of the lifestyle mindset, as an attraction to the “bling-bling”, which she described as “constantly bright lights, whoop, whoop, danger, scare, fight, flight. You got all of these things going on and I remember getting into recovery and thinking well fuck, this is boring.”

Women’s learning may play an active role in their ability to avoid relapse and certainly played a critical role in women’s movement through the transition process. The next section will describe the types and context of learning women experienced as they transitioned, using adult education literature to support the discussion.

Types and Contexts of Learning

Adult education researchers have been interested in how transitions impact development and learning (Merriam, 2005). I discuss women’s experiences with social learning, in the context of learning from other survivors, and transitional learning, in the context of work transitions in the following sections

Examples of social learning (type). The participant statements below portray women’s learning through observation, consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). In general, Elizabeth said,

“I learned a lot from the people at church as well. Like, I would kind of observe people and how they interacted, because I wasn’t taught how to interact in public...And so I’d really just kind of observe, you know, what normal was. And be like, ‘Oh, that’s how you act normal.’”

Clara specifically learned how to dress by observing other people. When asked how she learned how to dress she said,

“Well, watching women like [the women working at the organization] and the way they dress and understanding that they were not showing their boobs to everyone and they did not have a whale tail [G-string] up the back. And I was like, ‘Hold on. Hmmm. Classy, not classy; classy, not classy.’ Starting to look at what was appropriate. So, I think it was just by really being observant as to the women I wanted to more mirror.”

Social learning – survivor leaders (context). All of the participants engaged in social learning through the organizations helping them exit. Within those organizations, survivor leaders – other survivors who were further along in the exiting process– served a critical role in the participants’ social learning experiences. Survivor leaders were important for increasing relatability between the participant and counselor or mentor and providing the participant with hope.

Gloria described the importance of engaging with a survivor leader to increase relatability and provide her hope when she first exited. She said,

“She was in a business suit and I was in my tattered clothes, saying to me, ‘You can be where I am. You don’t have to ever do this again, and I was where you were 15 years ago and I had no hope.’ So it was the peer education or peer service delivery model. Otherwise, I don’t think that I would be here.”

Gloria’s reliance on a peer mentor is consistent with practices recommended by the

organization Standing Against Global Exploitation (SAGE) (Hotaling et al., 2003) in the context of women exiting the sex trade. The practice is also consistent with peer mentorship, counseling, and support groups used in other learning environments, such as for chronic illness (Baumgartner, 2007) and mental health (O'Hagan, 2009). The following section will further discuss women's experiences with transitional learning.

Transitional learning (type) and work transitions (context). In their transitional learning model, Stroobants et al.'s (2010), outlined four strategies women frequently use to navigate work transitions – *adaptation*, *growth*, *distinction*, and *resistance*, discussed in this section. As illustrated in Figure 2, the strategies are situated along two dimensions: (a) tensions between societal demands and personal demands, and (b) women's ability to influence structures impacting the employment opportunities available to them.

Nine of the ten women discussed utilizing *adaptation*, which involves prioritizing societal demands over personal demands due to an inflexible employment market (Stroobants et al., 2010). Elizabeth's experience represents the women's use of adaptation. Elizabeth was turned down for a job as a school teacher, because of her arrest record. She shifted her career plans, and undergraduate studies, from teaching to counseling. Elizabeth said, "And now I'm on this whole different career path, just because I can't be hired by the school." Consistent with Stroobants et al.'s (2010) findings, when engaged in adaptation, women's learning goals were oriented toward acquiring skills to meet and cope with market demands.

	Societal Demands	Personal Demands
Changeable Environment	<i>Resistance</i>	<i>Distinction</i>
Unchangeable Environment	<i>Adaptation</i>	<i>Growth</i>

Figure 2. Transitional learning model (Stroobants et al., 2010).

Growth, like adaptation, occurs in a market perceived to be unchangeable, while meeting personal rather than societal demands (Stroobants et al., 2010). Seven of the ten women utilized the growth strategy by pursuing degrees in higher education, while others completed vocation specific programs. Unfortunately, many of the women found the career paths related to their growth efforts were not open to them due to their criminal records, so they had to change their plans and engage in adaptation once again.

Distinction involves efforts to meet personal demands as a "way out of societal demands which are experienced as oppressive" (Stroobants et al., 2010, p. 118). All ten participants showed evidence of distinction when exiting the sex trade, which upon reflection they found to be an oppressive income source. Several women also engaged in distinction when leaving legal work after exiting, such as Gloria who quite a job after being sexually harassed by a boss.

Finally, *resistance* occurs in perceived to be changeable market conditions when an individual attempts to adjust social structures for societal, and not just personal, benefits (Stroobants et al., 2010). Three women explicitly discussed engaging in resistance. By utilizing resistance, these participants worked to disrupt the oppression they experienced as women, and specifically as women who engaged in and exited from a stigmatized income source. For example, Gloria utilized resistance by applying knowledge gained through her experiences in the sex trade and a degree in public policy (growth), to consult for the government to reform oppressive policies related to the sex trade. In the following section, I will outline the implications these findings and conclusions have on adult education theory and practice.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

For adult education theory, this study provides additional understanding about marginalized groups' transition to more mainstream identities, and social learning's role in the process. Consistent with Freirean (1970) education models the findings position survivors as experts and critical contributors to others' social learning experience. A significant contribution is further empirical support for transitional learning theory, specific to women's learning "related to work and their participation in adult education initiatives" (Stroobants et al., 2010, p. 116). The study provides a new context for transitional learning theory by investigating how women in a specific marginalized group perceive their ability to "influence or change arrangements and structures (e.g., a distribution of opportunities) within a particular field of life [e.g. work] and within society at large" (Stroobants et al., 2010, p. 118).

For adult education practice, the study has implications for marginalized populations learning for the purpose of work and social integration. Specifically, adult educators can gain a better understanding of women's transition experiences to assess learners' needs, design interventions to target women's needs, and to engage survivors as peer educators and leaders.

Additionally, this study shows women's entrance into the sex trade, existence in the sex trade, and lives after exiting the sex trade occur in the context of sociocultural factors, many of which create challenges for them. Future research should delve further into the effects of the sociocultural context on the transition process and learning. We know women are uniquely impacted by the judicial system's response, or lack of significant response, to violence against women, devaluing of their work, social stigmas around sex outside of marriage, and pressures to dress appropriately. Additional factors, such as race and class, likely exacerbate sociocultural influences (Hurtado, 1997). Individuals could benefit from a better understanding of how these factors may magnify the challenges women face while transitioning out of the sex trade.

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